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## Known Yet Unknowable: The Compatibility of Imageless Prayer and Images

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## Known Yet Unknowable:

### The Compatibility of Imageless Prayer and Images

Stephanie Falkowski

There exists two ways of praying, the one iconic and the other non-iconic. There is, first, on both the corporate and the private level, the way of ‘cataphatic’ prayer, making full use of the imagination, of poetry and music, of symbols and ritual gestures; and in this way of praying the holy icons have an essential place. Secondly, there is the way of ‘apophatic’ or hesychastic prayer, transcending images and discursive thought – a way commended by Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius, Dionysius, and Maximus, and expressed also in the practice of the Jesus Prayer. These two ways are not alternatives, still less are they mutually exclusive, but each deepens and completes the other.<sup>1</sup>

This quote from Kallistos Ware speaks to an interesting dynamic within the spirituality of the Christian tradition – the tension between cataphatic and apophatic prayer forms. On the one hand, human creativity and expression are welcome and celebrated, and integral to one’s relationship with the Divine. On the other, these same things are frowned on and dispensed with. Yet both have their place, and as Ware reminds us, are not mutually exclusive or to be taken as alternate paths depending on what resonates with each individual Christian. One might assume that this means living with a certain degree of tension and seeming irreconcilability between these paths that we blindly trust to actually be interwoven. However,

in examining the two prayer forms Ware singles out, we find that they indeed share much in terms of their vision of God, Christ, humanity, and salvation. Indeed, the initial incompatibility that strikes when comparing things that are as definitionally opposed as are iconic and non-iconic approaches to spirituality, becomes much mitigated, and Ware's assessment rings true: each does indeed deepen and complete the other. In demonstrating this, this paper will first examine the spirituality of iconography, including both its kataphatic bent, and its embrace of mystery. We will then turn to the practice of imageless prayer, with special focus on the Jesus prayer, to determine the character of its apophaticism and how this follows the patterns set forth in the discussion of icons. Finally, the paper will conclude with some commentary on the effect arrived at through the resulting understanding of the compatibility of these two seemingly dissimilar spiritual approaches.

## I. ICONS

“Cataphatic” is defined as an adjective for knowledge of God obtained through affirmation rather than by negation. Often, this positive approach is distrusted in Eastern Christendom, and its opposite, apophatic theology has become “a means of distinguishing a ‘proper’ form of Orthodox theology from what they often described as ‘Western theology’ that they found to be too assertive or *kataphatic* (scholastic) in character.”<sup>2</sup> However, “This sweeping generalization of western thought neglected the truth that Orthodox theological tradition itself was and is highly kataphatic...”<sup>3</sup> There is perhaps nowhere where this is more immediately evident than in the world of iconography. In daring to depict Christ pictorially, while maintaining that he is divine – which is certainly the case each time an icon of Christ is written – the presumption is made that this can be done; that one can assign physical attributes (e.g. “a man in middle age, with dark brown hair down to His shoulders, a short (sometimes

forked) beard, regular facial features of the so-called Greco-Semitic type and large brown (or blue) eyes”<sup>4</sup>) to a member of the Godhead instead of relying only on negated statements.

The basis for this presumption is the fact of the Incarnation. As John of Damascus tells us in his defense of icons, “I venture to draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes through flesh and blood. I do not draw an image of the immortal Godhead. I paint the flesh of God.” John is very careful of his terminology and echoes the formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon, and shows that to image the “flesh of God” is to agree with these doctrinal definitions, for this flesh of God he speaks of is not worn

“as if it were a garment or He constituted a fourth person of the Trinity – God forbid. That flesh is divine, and endures after its assumption. Human nature was not lost in the Godhead, but just as the Word made flesh remained the Word, so flesh became the Word remaining flesh, becoming rather, one with the Word through union.”<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, iconography takes seriously this union of natures as proclaimed at Chalcedon: two natures, which

“undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ”<sup>6</sup>

John sees that icons of Christ are not only warranted, but necessary manifestations of this truth.

Other aspects of iconography are likewise distinctly cataphatic in nature. For instance, the point that personal details are always included. This was already noted in the case of Christ, but also follows for images of Mary and of the saints. Figures do

not become transfigured to the point of unrecognizability, rather, “iconography does not ignore a saint’s individual features and external distinguishing marks (sex, age, hairstyle, shape of beard, headwear, etc).”<sup>7</sup> The saints do not on account of their holiness and deification become too holy and mysterious to depict, nor are their personal characteristics eliminated because they are thought to be “too human.”

In a similar vein, iconography strives to represent things directly and not through symbols. Canon 82 of the Quinsext Council declares that “the figure in human form of the Lamb who taketh away the sin of the world, Christ our God, be henceforth exhibited in images, instead of the ancient lamb, so that all may understand by means of it the depths of the humiliation of the Word of God”<sup>8</sup> Symbolic or typological representation in icons is minimized, though it is still often found in the background. For the most part, the Old Testament symbols are “replaced by direct representation of the truth they prefigured.”<sup>9</sup> Thus theology is displayed as less mediated through symbols, less in the apophatic method of speaking only of what God is not, and more so in a cataphatic way of being able to get at the truth directly and positively. For Christ is truth, and he is depictable.

However, the cataphatic nature of iconography is complicated by its integration of mystery and the unknown. For one thing, the icon is commonly understood as “a window into the invisible world. It...reveals the Kingdom to come.”<sup>10</sup> This is a world unknown and outside of what “people are familiar with in their everyday lives,” and it is depicted as such.<sup>11</sup> Because it requires this “otherworldly” appearance, “the realistic or, rather, naturalistic method of depicting is not suitable for the icon. It requires symbols and signs in which the image of the Kingdom to come can be divined.”<sup>12</sup> “Divined” – not necessarily known directly. Particular techniques have developed which express this world of the coming Kingdom, along with an entire

language of symbolism, which iconographers follow, and through which the icons are to be interpreted. One of the more notable tactics is the use of reverse perspective, in which space is structured such that “there is no single point on the horizon where all lines meet, and objects get larger rather than smaller, as the recede into the distance” – all to emphasize that “icons are images of eternity, so everything in them is different, including space and time. The logic of the earthly world does not extend to icons.”<sup>13</sup> Note that this “reverse perspective” is, quite literally, the opposite approach to that “direct perspective” which renders paintings realistic. While we may not know how to directly depict the Kingdom, it can be done in the apophatic move of depicting the negation of this world’s form and defying its logic.

This lack of “worldly logic” and natural realism is also found in the human figures that are the subject matter of the icons. Though, as already established, nothing “leads to the disappearance of the bodily element in the icon, to abstractionism, in which symbols and signs exist without anthropomorphic forms,” these human bodies *are* shown to be transfigured, the body “of a dweller in paradise, not of an earthly person.”<sup>14</sup> One way in which this is conveyed is to make the saint appear weightless, so that “they barely touch the ground.” Similarly, “the figures do not cast shadows,” for in their heavenly realm, “there is no night, only eternal day.” One last feature is that these “dwellers in paradise” are given emotionless expressions, highlighting their freedom from earthly passions. Through tactics like these, icons serve as windows to world that can only be portrayed as *not* like our earthly existence – a rather apophatic move hidden within what is itself, highly cataphatic.

## II. IMAGELESS PRAYER

The apophatic tradition prefers to allow God to be His radically unknowable self, incorporeal, invisible, and incomprehensible. Therefore, a type of prayer is preferred which reflects this understanding of God. Evagrius of Pontus wrote much regarding of this type of prayer: “When you pray, do not form images of the divine within yourself, nor allow your mind to be impressed with any form, but approach the Immaterial immaterially and you will come to understanding”<sup>15</sup> Such imageless prayer is difficult to achieve, and Evagrius does not provide a method of effectuating this ideal.

The difficulty is not only in refusing all images for God the mind might put forth, but simultaneously, to keep the mind focused on God and open to him. In this more apophatic and mystically inclined line of thinking, the way to knowing God at a meaningful level requires stillness and silence, and openness to God. This is not merely external quiet, but more importantly, and often harder to come by, inner quiet. The reason such inner quiet is elusive is in the restlessness of our minds. According to Diadochus, a fifth century bishop of Photice who laid the groundwork for this sort of prayer, the intellect, or *nous* “will demand from us an exercise that satisfies its need for activity.”<sup>16</sup> The mind wants to think, and gets in the way of achieving the non-discursive, imageless prayer that Evagrius so recommended. Diadochus, however, provides a solution: when the mind is making its demands for stimulation, “we must let out a “Lord Jesus,” as the only perfect way to achieve our goal...let [the mind] contemplate this word alone at all times in its interior treasury so as not to return to the imagination.”<sup>17</sup> This was later developed into the Jesus Prayer, which retains as its goal, “to bring us to the level of *hēsuchia* or stillness – to a state of intuitive, non-discursive awareness in which we no longer form pictures in our mind’s eye or analyse concepts with our reasoning brain, but feel and know the

Lord's immediate presence in a direct personal encounter."<sup>18</sup> It is from this word for stillness, *hēsuchia*, that the discipline of reciting this prayer became known as Hesychasm, and those that practiced it Hesychasts.

As mentioned, the discipline of the Jesus Prayer may result in "direct personal encounter," which is often described as a vision of light. This is generally understood to be "a true vision of God in His divine energies."<sup>19</sup> Here God, when known as far as a human creature can know him, is known as Light, a fairly abstract image of God, still without form or substance. Also, it should be noted, that this "uncreated light," is a vision of God's *energies*, and not of his essence. This was a point of much contention, as the concerns of the more apophatically inclined involve an interest in keeping God unknowable. With the distinction between energies and essence, God in God's self remains properly out of reach even for those who achieve states of no-thought, with a stable, focused nous descended into the heart, where it prays ceaselessly.

Though the practice of the Jesus Prayer embraces some rather apophatic conceptions of God, it was actually long accused of the opposite, particularly in the controversy over Hesychasm during the fourteenth century. These accusations were made along three lines. First, the bodily posturing and controlled breathing which are associated with the Jesus Prayer present a problem in that they are very physical, embodied actions, which was interpreted by Barlaam the Calabrian to mean that Hesychasts were guilty of "holding a grossly materialistic conception of prayer."<sup>20</sup> The second accusation was that if what was thought to be "uncreated light" could be seen with bodily eyes, that it was not truly "the eternal light of the Divinity, but a temporary and created light."<sup>21</sup> The third is perhaps the most grievous, that the Jesus Prayer purported to open people to a direct experience of God. These accusations, all eventually discounted, point to the existence of a different side of this generally apophatic



practice, a side not apophatic enough, a side with cataphatic tendencies.

One might expect that when brainstorming ways in which the Jesus Prayer could be considered cataphatic, to start with the fact that the Jesus Prayer uses words to reach out to God, and not only words, but scripted words: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me. This is a prayer of remarkable depth given its brevity: “In one brief sentence it embodies the two chief mysteries of the Christian faith, the Incarnation and the Trinity.”<sup>22</sup> The incarnation is mentioned in equating “Lord Jesus” with “Son of God;” the Trinity’s mention is more implicit, the Father being assumed by calling Jesus the Son, and the Spirit assumed because the name Jesus cannot be said apart from the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). The prayer also incorporates moments of adoration, penitence, and the hope of forgiveness. The prayer is not merely worded and therefore discursive, but it can invite much thought and reflection, as it certainly has. Thus, the Jesus Prayer should not be mistaken as “simply a rhythmic incantation, but an invocation addressed directly to the person of Jesus Christ”<sup>23</sup> This all is true, but limited when the prayer is performed in Hesychast fashion. As Ware explains, “while itself an invocation of words, by virtue of its brevity and simplicity the prayer Lord Jesus enables us to reach out beyond language into silence, beyond discursive thinking into intuitive awareness.”<sup>24</sup> It is not a prayer meant to be dissected and analyzed, but rather to be prayed, and prayed with one’s whole being – not just the mind.

The fact that the Jesus Prayer is to be prayed with the engagement of the body forms a stronger cataphatic link than did its wordedness. The prescribed bodily position and the goal of integrating the prayer with breathing patterns, and possibly even the heartbeat, seem to suggest a God that can be reached through embodied means, a jump in logic that does not easily flow from the presuppositions that God is incorporeal and immaterial. Interestingly, it is at this

point where the divine images and imageless prayer meet and use identical arguments. For, “that same doctrine of salvation which underlay the disputes about...the Holy Icons, lies also at the heart of the Hesychast controversy.”<sup>25</sup> The questions, as it was with icons, were along the lines of whether the body has any role in salvation, if it was an impediment to salvation, or if the body was saved along with the soul. In the case of icons, it was decided that the body was saved, and therefore transfigured bodies should be portrayed as helps along the path of salvation. During the Hesychast controversy, Gregory Palamas, in his defense of the Hesychast position, “took up and developed the ideas implicit in earlier writings...the same emphasis on the human body, as we have seen, lies behind the Orthodox doctrine of icons.”<sup>26</sup> And as with icons, the Incarnation formed a good starting point for stressing the goodness of our embodied state. Gregory won this debate, ensuring it was understood that “our body is not an enemy, but a partner and collaborator with our soul.”<sup>27</sup> With the Incarnation, an essentially cataphatic doctrine resulting in the embodiment of God, playing a central role in the defense of Hesychasm, an essentially apophatic practice, we see the irreconcilability of these terms become increasingly arbitrary.

We already briefly touched on the accusation lodged against the Hesychasts that the vision of light they saw could not be “uncreated light” and therefore, not a direct experience of God as so claimed. The claims that precipitated these accusations form perhaps the most cataphatic of all aspects of Hesychasm: that the Unknowable God can be known. True, this is somewhat mitigated by the energies/essence distinction noted previously, but even the idea that it is possible to experience God’s *energies* in this life would seem more in agreement with cataphatic theology than with apophatic. Thus once more, the distinction between these two opposite poles of theological thinking is softened and indefinite.

### III. Conclusions

Seeing now just how arbitrary the distinction between apophatic and cataphatic can be when examined using practical examples, it is worth pausing to consider what was gained through complicating these two understandings of theology and weakening and confusing the meaning of otherwise well-defined technical terms. Naturally, it leads away from dualistic thinking, making room for realities that do not belong purely in one category or another. It also lessens the temptation to consider things as opposites, and assign opposite value judgments to them as well. As earlier alluded to, the cataphatic tradition is unfortunately associated with what Florovsky has described as the *pseudomorphosis* of Orthodox thought, or the Western captivity by which the East feels their unique identity is threatened, along with their orthodoxy. The corrective: a stronger focus on the apophatic side of theology. Yet, these terms, not diametrically opposed by any means, cannot easily be assigned the opposite values, one referring to everything that is wrong with theology, and everything that is right.

Yet, nearly invariably, one end of the apophatic/cataphatic spectrum will appeal to an individual more than the other. Understanding the breakdown of these terms in practice aids in seeing that there is more than one way to interpret each spiritual practice, and leads to seeing both as more nuanced and more acceptable. It also eases tension in adhering to both forms of spirituality, transforming the tension into a less threatening sort of irony. Likewise, it demonstrates that paradoxes need not be thought of as inconsistencies or faults in logic; there is a chance the conflict is only on the surface.

*Notes*

- 1 Kallistos Ware, "The Spirituality of the Icon." Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, eds., *The Study of Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 198.
- 2 John Anthony McGuckin, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 2 Vols. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). s.v. "Apophaticism," 39.
- 3 Ibid., 39.
- 4 Irina Yazykova and Hegumen Luka (Golovkov), "The Theological Principles of the Icon and Iconography" in L. Evseyeva, et.al. *A History of Icon Painting* (Grand Holdings Publishers, Moscow, 2005).
- 5 St. John Damascene. *On Holy Images*. Translated by Mary H. Allies. (London: Thomas Baker, 1898), 5.
- 6 "Definition of Faith," Council of Chalcedon (451). Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 Vols. (London : Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 86.
- 7 Yazykova and Luka (Golovkov), "The Theological Principles of the Icon and Iconography" in Evseyeva, *A History of Icon Painting*, 15.
- 8 "Canon LXXXII" The Quinsext Council (or the Council in Trullo), 692. In *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, trans H. R. Percival, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace, (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), 401.
- 9 Leonid Ouspensky, "Icon and Art" in Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, World Spirituality v. 16 (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 387.
- 10 Yazykova and Luka (Golovkov), "The Theological Principles of the Icon and Iconography" in Evseyeva, et.al. *A History of Icon Painting*, 13.
- 11 Ibid., 13.
- 12 Ibid., 13.
- 13 Ibid., 14.
- 14 Ibid., 14-15.

- 15 Evagrius, *Chapters On Prayer*, ch. 66. Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 199.
- 16 Diadochus, *Discourses on Judgment and Spiritual Discernment (One Hundred Gnostic Chapters)*, ch. 59. Cliff Ermatinger, *Following The Footsteps Of The Invisible: The Complete Works of Diadochus of Photikë* (Liturgical Press, 2010), 77.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Kallistos Ware, “The Origins of the Jesus Prayer: Diadochus, Gaza, Sinai” in Jones, Wainwright, and Yarnold, eds., *The Study of Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 184.
- 19 Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New ed. (London, England ; New York, N.Y: Penguin Books, 1993), 69.
- 20 Ibid., 66.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Kallistos Ware, “The Power of the Name: The Function of the Jesus Prayer,” *Cross Currents* 24, no. 2–3 (September 1974): 189.
- 23 Ware, “The Origins of the Jesus Prayer: Diadochus, Gaza, Sinai” in Jones, Wainwright, and Yarnold, *The Study of Spirituality*, 183.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 69.
- 26 Ibid., 67.
- 27 Ibid.